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ABSTRACT

The concern of this paper is how people in organizations understand the dynamics of an organization's practices. The way that organizational culture influences advising systems is considered. The focus is on how people understand the function of academic advising and the influence of three concepts of culture (cognitive, symbolic, and psychodynamic). The way each of these concepts could enable individuals to maintain a view of their advising program that is inconsistent with advising practice is illustrated. According to the cognitive view, culture is a system of knowledge and beliefs about the organization and its practices. The symbolic perspective emphasizes culture as systems of shared symbols and meanings. The psychodynamic perspective views culture as the expression of unconscious psychological processes. The way that these three perspectives operate in judging the competence of college students is addressed. The illustrations show how advisers can deny that students require advising assistance. The three ways of seeing organizational culture provide a framework for understanding how people understand, as well as seeing how understanding can be translated into behaviors and actions. Implications for practice are considered. (SW)

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ORGANIZATION CULTURE: UNDERSTANDING ADVISING SYSTEMS *

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Organization Culture: Understanding Advising Systems

Organizations need mechanisms to interpret ambiguous events and to provide meaning and direction for participants. According to Daft and Weick (1984) organizations are meaning systems and this distinguishes them from lower level systems. This means scanning and sensemaking activities are at the center of things. Despite this, contradictions frequently emerge, particularly between what we hear organization members say about organization functions and what, in fact, we are able to observe about those same functions?

The driving concern of this paper is how people in organizations understand the dynamics of an organization's practices. How are patterns of organization achieved, sustained, and changed? In this paper, I will focus specifically on contradictions with respect to a common function in academic organizations: advising students.

On one hand, one frequently encounters a fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" image of advising programs. That is, the official institutional posture is that there is a strong need for academic advising. The organization usually experiences cyclical demands for improvements in the program and administrators espouse levels of expectations regarding advising. Finally, stories of advising "successes" are circulated widely throughout the organization. The espoused position of the organization portrays advising as a good, valued, and valuable program that requires only relatively minor adjustments to make it an outstanding operation. In other words the program, as in the story, is merely in restful slumber waiting, one assumes, for the chosen rescuer to appear.

On the other hand, the actual characteristics of the advising program have a grim reality usually associated with the original

tale about Red Riding Hood where, as you may recall, the wolf won. One finds, typically, that advisor training programs are nonexistent or sparsely attended, the program is understaffed and underfunded, efforts to change advising policies or practices are resisted by key personnel, there is a lack of integration between advising and the core educational functions of the organization, and the organizational structure tends to maintain fragmentation of the advising program.

What would account for such a discrepancy between practice and proclamation? Why would colleges and universities have an espoused understanding of advising that is so different from the reality that surrounds these programs? What form of "understanding" would support organization members having one espoused view of advising and another, quite different, set of actual characteristics that define the program? The concept of organization culture can increase our understanding of the discrepancy between espoused and actual characteristics of advising programs.

First, what is culture? Culture, according to Kilman (1984), is the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and attitudes that members of a community hold in common. Organization culture is comprised of behavioral norms, hidden assumptions, and general attributions of human nature (Kilman, et. al., 1985). "Behavioral norms," as used here, are those behaviors and attitudes that members of a group or organization expect one another to adopt. For example, on some campuses, persons are addressed by academic titles such as "Professor," "Doctor," or "Dean," while on other campuses, first names are the norm for addressing others. "Hidden assumptions" refer to fundamental beliefs behind all decisions and actions:

these include what stakeholders want and need, how they make decisions and which actions they're likely to take now and in the future. For example, in an academic community, a fundamental belief concerns the importance of research and publication. Though commonly held in all types of institutions of higher education the practice is, in fact, realized by only a small proportion of academic staff there employed. Although the assumption is that academic staff publish, the reality is that only a small proportion actually do so. Finally, "human nature" refers to that collection of dynamics, wants, motives, and desires that shape the behavior and perceptions of any group of people. An example would be the social conditions or climate created that affect how much attention people seek to gain and determine how much different people receive.

People in organizations are engaged in ongoing attempts to understand what is happening around them. A fundamental question concerns how people in organizations understand their environment and their experience in it and how that understanding is associated with action. A related assumption is that sensemaking, or understanding, is a process involving the social construction of reality. People, determined to find meaning, make relationships by bringing connections and patterns to the action they observe. In organizations, members do not so much engage in a process of discovering some existing reality as they do of creating it or learning it from others who are mutually involved in its construction. At issue when considering discrepancies between espoused beliefs and actions is what do people observe in the environment and what is selected for use in making meaning? Schall (1983) suggests that organization culture is a relatively enduring, interdependent symbolic system of values, beliefs, and

assumptions evolving from and imperfectly shared by interacting organization members that allows them to explain, coordinate, and evaluate behavior and to ascribe common meanings to stimuli encountered in the organizational context. Using this perspective, can we make sense of the difference between espoused and actual characteristics of advising systems mentioned earlier? In this paper I will illustrate how each of three concepts of culture could enable organization members to maintain a view of their advising program that is inconsistent with advising practice.

Understanding Organization Culture

Smircich (1983) describes three conceptualizations of culture that will inform this exploration. It may be useful to think of these three perspectives as lenses of understanding that can be used to "see", or understand, culture. The first lens is a cognitive perspective. This lens suggests that culture is a system of shared cognitions, that is, a system of knowledge and beliefs. The cognitive emphasis views organizations as networks of subjective meanings and frames of reference that organization members share to varying degrees. These "cognitions" are organized into a structure of knowledge about the organization and its practices. One question that guides a cognitive inquiry is what "rules" or "scripts" for action are suggested by the data that make up this structure of knowledge. For example, it may be "understood" that students in a particular group or category are academically less-well "prepared" and a "burden" in the classroom. Those who share this "understanding" would thus either resign themselves to lower expectations for classroom achievement or prepare to work more strenuously to raise achievement levels.

A second lens is a symbolic perspective. This lens puts emphasis on culture as systems of shared symbols and meanings. The focus of this form of organizational analysis is on how individuals interpret and understand their experience and how these interpretations and understandings relate to action. The interpretation usually endows the symbol with some higher-order value or meaning. For example, the advisor's office hours could come to symbolize the importance faculty place on nonacademic concerns of students in an educational context. The question that guides our inquiry for this perspective is how do individuals interpret their experience and how are these interpreted symbols related to action?

The third lens is a psychodynamic perspective. This lens views culture as the expression of unconscious psychological processes. Organizational forms and practices are understood as projections of unconscious processes and are analyzed in reference to the dynamic connection between the sub-conscious "understanding" of organization members and the real-world consequences that surround them. Often, whether at the organization or individual level, persons are unaware that their intra-psychic needs are met through these subconscious processes. The question that aids our inquiry is what intra-psychic problems are solved, or avoided, by persistent patterns in organizational functioning? Many colleges, for example, state clearly that advising is the prerogative of the faculty. This "position" is maintained even in the face of a reality of an advising program that is ineffective, inefficient, or non-existent. The question is, what psychic needs are met by such an untenable stance of reserving the function of advising for the most highly educated group on campus while actual program services are in disarray?

I do not wish to suggest that one of these perspectives, or lenses, is more correct or appropriate than the others. Rather it is useful to separate these three perspectives to consider how concepts or views of organization meaning-making, or culture, may account for differences between espoused and actual characteristics of advising programs. Further, we will examine the usefulness of the three lenses in helping organization members "understand" students and their needs.

Let us turn now to how these perspectives (cognitive, symbolic, and psychodynamic) may define for organization members one characteristic of students: academic competence. We have selected "competence" for analysis, but one could just as well have used independence, responsibility, or some other characteristic. In the framework described here, organization culture aids members in producing a "reality" for the organization, in this case estimates of the competence of students in the institution. Moreover, this understanding about students leads to a reasonably best fit between what members think the organization wants to do, can do, and should do. Our task, then, is to explore how each of these three perspectives, or lenses, about the competence of students could result in an organization espousing the view that advising is important but, in fact, operating in a manner designed to accomplish little to improve the advising program.

Lenses of Understanding

The Cognitive Perspective--Organization members may observe that many of the students do well in courses, have above-average College Board scores, are well spoken and conduct themselves with poise and confidence. This selective perception of currently available information initiates a process of reasoning that

results in the "script" that all students are competent and that differences in competence can be validly discerned. This script implies that advising or other forms of assistance are superfluous; therefore, inadequate advising support for students is not a critical need warranting change. This generalized "script" of students' competence is kept cognitively separate by organization members from the reality of the institution's appraisal mechanisms (tests, paper, quizzes, etc) that faculty use to discriminate between students on a competence continuum in the academic arena. On one hand the "script" maintains that all students are competent. On the other hand, the institutional appraisal mechanisms suggest that not only are students not equally competent, it is both possible, and desirable, to ascertain the distribution of competence they possess.

The Symbolic Perspective--Organization members may observe that faculty office hours are seldom used by students or that appointments, when made, are frequently not kept. Moreover, they may observe that involvement by faculty with students outside the classroom is generally low. One interpretation drawn from these observations is that, apparently, students either do not need or will not avail themselves of assistance from faculty. Following this interpretation, it's a short conceptual leap to concluding that the symbolic behavior of low student-faculty interaction indicates there is little or no evidence that students are, in fact, incompetent and in need of advising or other assistance. Consequently, if students are perceived as competent then the organization is not compelled to actually improve the advising program.

The Psychodynamic Perspective--Here we ask what do patterns of organization activity reveal about the psychological needs of

people involved? Specifically, what intra-psychic problems are solved, or avoided, by the scenario of the organization espousing one view about advising but acting in a quite different manner? We may speculate that, subconsciously, admitting that students are in need of advising assistance or that advisors are obligated to provide relevant, or useful, assistance is threatening to attributions of advisor's competence held by advisors. The competence of the advisor to advise may be called into question, tested, or refuted in the practice of advising. Or, advisors may fear confrontation with the boundaries of what is appropriate content for advising; a shift might permit the more threatening personal, intimate, or affective components of students' lives to surface during advising sessions. Many adults have unreasonable fears, or expectations, of their ability to deal effectively with the turbulence they associate with the developmental tasks of adolescents or young adults.

In short, by denying that students require assistance, one can avoid the issue of whether advisors require help themselves in order to assist students, or need help in coping with the demands of providing advising assistance. If one views students as competent, then one need not experience concern or anxiety about providing assistance or whether, in fact, one can be helpful to students in need. In other words, the advisor's problem of undue anxiety about providing advising service to students is solved by viewing students as not needing advising services.

Using Our Understanding

Our view through these three lenses of organization culture provides a framework for understanding how people understand. Moreover, it suggests how the understanding may be translated into behaviors and actions within the organization. How can

organization or program managers generate an altered context for meaning in organizational life? What might the advising coordinator do to construct the basis on which organization members may clarify the view of students provided by these three lenses? We should not assume that organization culture is something one can readily manipulate. At best, one can try to understand something about the culture and, where possible, act in ways that may influence the organization's environment. What, then, might we urge the advising coordinator to do to improve the "quality" of the image of students provided to members by each of our three lenses?

First, the cognitive perspective. Here the advising coordinator may be advised to gather information, facts, that alter the "rules" or "scripts" about students. For example, data may indicate that students with high grades or College Board scores are, in some critical educational areas, not competent. These new data may then be used to substantiate the need, the value-added contribution, and the importance for the institution of advising for students who were formerly thought competent.

Second, the symbolic perspective. Here the advising coordinator may help members to understand, and to appreciate, that the manner in which they interpreted the situation determined their choice of action. For example, the coordinator may encourage faculty to see that viewing students as competent obviates the institution's need to bolster, improve, or change the advising program. Furthermore, the coordinator may encourage advisors to identify alternate interpretations of students' behavior. Office hours may not be used by students, or appointments not kept, because students are anxious and unsure of how to interact with faculty. Students' avoidance of advisors may

have little to do with competence or lack of it. One can, therefore, just as readily view students as evidencing great need rather than concluding they are omni-competent.

Finally, the psychodynamic. Here the advising coordinator may provide support and encouragement to advisors for the consideration of the premise that present organization inaction in advising is designed, albeit subconsciously, to protect and defend against excessive anxiety. Thus, to continue to deny assistance to students may be a great disservice to students, the institution and, perhaps most of all, to advisors themselves. If, in fact, the anxiety is real, other approaches may be used to reduce, eliminate, or cope with the pressures and anxieties they experience.

Implications for Practice

What meaning does all of this have for us? What can we do about, or with, organizational culture? Certainly we can become more aware of the sensemaking that goes on in the organization. Sensemaking, we are reminded by Gioia (1986), is a process whereby people attempt to construct meaningful explanations for situations and their experiences within those situations.

Smircich and Stubbart (1985) suggest that culture has been put there by patterns of action--not by a process of "perceiving" the environment, but by a process of "making" the environment. People make sense of their situation by engaging in an interpretation process that forms the basis for their organized behavior. Advising coordinators can strategically influence that process. They can provide opportunities for organization members to explain or account for the streams of events and actions that occur--a universe within which organizational events and experiences take on meaning. Thus, those interested in

influencing the culture may consider using the following options and related questions suggested by Smircich and Stubbart:

1. Rather than focusing exclusively on issues of production, results, or consequences, focus on process issues. For example, how can we help organization members explain what led to our current understanding of advising? What keeps the understanding alive? Why do we keep it alive?

2. Concentrate on the values, symbols, language, and dramas that form the backdrop for decision-making regarding advising rather than on the decisions or the design of the decision-making structures. For example, what meaning do we, or others, attach to what is happening? How might the sequence of actions in the organization be explained? Why do we describe the organization as we do? What symbols are important?

3. Rather than confining oneself to the technical-intellectual aspects of advising's organizational structures, learn to express and to elaborate on the social-emotional basis for organizational life. For example, what are the affective components at work here? For individuals? For groups? For the organization?

The idea of enacting one's symbolic reality, that is, making sense or understanding as an active process, underscores the view that one's own actions and the actions of others constitute an organization and its environment. In short, all organization members have some responsibility for the difference between the

espoused and the actual characteristics of the advising program in the institution. Understanding the relationship between organization culture and the workings of the advising system may provide benefits for understanding other organization functions or system dynamics.

Using Organization Culture

Increased understanding of organization culture provides several benefits. First, it provides an understanding of how the current situation was generated.(i.e. How did we get here?) Second, it indicates which course of action might be better than another. (i.e. Should we do A or B? Both? Neither?) Third, it provides a means of assessing a proposed course of action and for "fine tuning" that procedure. (i.e. If we do A, what's the best way to do it?) Fourth, it provides a means for anticipating some consequences "before the fact." (i.e. If we do A, what can we expect to happen as a result?) Finally, it provides a framework for long-term strategic planning as well as for more immediate tactical interventions. (i.e. What's the big picture? or What's the snapshot view of our current situation?) These procedures or processes of making meaning of organization culture are useful to organization members as they strive to appreciate, and use, the complexities of the organizational life that swirls around them.

Perhaps we should spend more time thinking about how we got to know what we know and less time thinking about what we know. Weick (1979) argues that it is not only behavior that becomes structured in organizations but also information and shared meaning--meaning that has been socially constructed, negotiated, and consensually validated. This notion calls attention to the need in organizations to make sense of things, to be aware of external events, and to translate cues into meaning for

organizational participants. Managers, for example the advising coordinator, are responsible for this process and are actively involved in it. One implication is for managers to think of organizations as interpretation systems and to take seriously their roles as interpreters or translators (Daft and Weick, 1984).

A second implication is that we should understand that in many instances the goals of our planning may be destroyed by the forces, or dynamics, of culture that are present in the organization. If cultural forces are not recognized or attended to, then the best laid plans have only a tenuous hold on becoming a permanent part of the organization.

Finally, for our purposes as organizational consultants, this approach suggests that we practice a more informed, eclectic, and self-conscious participation in our respective organizational cultures. To echo Smircich and Stubbart (1985) relecting on organization culture aims to make explicit the knowledge (often taken for granted, but untested) by which organization members construe their situation and explore the multiple, often competing, systems of knowledge existing within a situation. As we do this, one outcome to be anticipated, at least in the arena of academic advising, is that what our organizations say about advising may begin to appear more and more similar to what, in fact, they do about advising. And, by investigating one instance of organizational practice in depth, we will increase our understanding of other organization functions as well.

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ABSTRACT

Organization Culture: Understanding Advising Systems

This is a description of how people understand organization dynamics. Organizations frequently espouse descriptions of function that differ from actual practice. The focus is understanding related to the function of academic advising. An organizational culture framework is used to illustrate how members understand aspects of their organization culture and how such understanding is translated into action that shapes reality.

Understanding how organization culture influences advising systems also benefits those wishing to understand other organization dynamics.